

## ABSTRACT

*An in-house resident volunteer program can be a democratic, low cost, and innovative way for retirement housing facilities to provide desired activities for residents. Such a program can offer residents the opportunity for active participation, meaningful decision making, and continuous involvement, which in turn is associated with the maintenance of general well-being. A resident volunteer program in Memphis is described so that other retirement housing facilities may implement similar approaches.*

# Retirement Housing Resident Volunteer Programs

**Marsha S. Shine and Jean A. Steitz**

Gerontologists have long recognized the importance of the special environmental needs of older people, particularly in institutions and retirement housing (Altman, Lawton, & Wohlwill, 1984). Marans, Hunt, and Vakalo (1984) have found most retirement housing facilities to be supportive environments which cater to older healthy retirees who are interested in maintaining an independent life style. However, how seniors can continue their independent living within retirement facilities has been a neglected area in research and service related programs (Quinn & Hughston, 1984).

A majority of older people want to regulate their own daily routine. Those who live in retirement facilities want to be involved in the planning of their own entertainment and educational activities (Mellinger & Holt, 1982; Moos & Lemke, 1984). It therefore appears that a volunteer program which offers these highly active and independent older people opportunities for involvement would be beneficial. Indeed, a resident volunteer program can be a rewarding way of helping seniors continue an independent life style. The purpose of this article is to describe one quite successful resident volunteer program so that other communities and other retirement housing facilities may implement similar approaches.

## THE OLDER VOLUNTEER

Much of the literature about older volunteers emphasizes the gratification and feeling of self-worth that may be achieved

by the volunteer. Indeed, one of the main correlates of a volunteer role is increased self-esteem coming at a crucial time when many older adults have lost lifetime roles, are doubting their usefulness, and have decreasing opportunities for regular social interaction.

In evaluating the effects of long term participation in 20 national Retired Senior Volunteer Programs, Booz, Allen, and Hamilton (1985) found that the programs provided opportunities for social interaction and engendered feelings of usefulness and accomplishment. Continued program participation was associated with the participants' enhanced sense of well-being and outlook on life, while providing meaningful service and contributing indirectly to the national work force.

Fengler (1984), in comparing life satisfaction between elderly volunteers, employees, and participants in a meal site program, found that the strongest and most consistent predictor of life satisfaction for disadvantaged elders was participating as a volunteer for a Retired Senior Volunteer Program. Hunter and Linn (1980-81) found that elderly volunteers as compared to nonvolunteers had a significantly higher degree of life satisfaction, a stronger will to live, and fewer symptoms of depression and anxiety. In turn, many of those engaged in volunteer activities felt such work changed their lives for the better and provided a new focus for their attention. Kouri (1984) also found that programs like ACTION's Foster Grandparent Program and the Retired Senior Volun-

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teer Programs offered young elders opportunities for community service, while demonstrating that late adulthood can be a productive and rewarding time of life.

#### THE PROGRAM

Plough Towers is a HUD Section 8 high-rise residence for the elderly located in Memphis, TN. Plough Towers has had as a goal from its beginning to create an environment in which residents could gain a sense of self-worth, feel productive, and provide a service to the community. In order to accomplish this goal, the Board of Directors and staff developed a resident volunteer program shortly after Plough Towers opened in October of 1980.

Today, 62% of the 167 residents are involved to some extent in the volunteer program. Last year alone, volunteers contributed over 20,000 hours of work. This represents 18% of the total Retired Senior Volunteer Program hours in the Memphis area.

A resident council, composed of volunteers, takes the responsibility for planning much of the activities. Volunteers are involved in support staffing and operational activities as well as in the design and implementation of recreational activities and materials. Residents staff a sign-in desk, sell stamps, operate a library, run a convenience store, and operate a transportation system. They prepare bulk mailings for nonprofit organizations and make holiday favors for hospitals and nursing homes. Residents knit needed items for cancer patients in a children's hospital, for a county-run community children's clinic, and for adolescents and children in group homes. Volunteers serve as floor and fire monitors throughout the complex and work in the administrative office answering the telephone and writing work orders. All of these activities impact on both the facility and the extended external community.

During the seven-plus years the volunteer program has been in existence, a dependency between community agencies and volunteers has developed. Several agencies rely solely on the services provided by the volunteers at Plough Towers. In addition, the volunteer program consciously builds in contact between resi-

dents and agency personnel. This allows residents to feel the dependency of agencies for the work performed by the volunteers which in turn supports the residents' feelings of self-worth and ability to make a significant contribution to the community.

Volunteers are involved in all phases of decision making pertaining to the operation of the retirement complex. Staff and board members acknowledge at all opportunities that the small nonresident staff of Plough Towers could not possibly run the number of services available in the facility without volunteer resident support. As one example, before a convenience store opened, the volunteers decided the hours the store would be open, what would be sold, and how the merchandise would be displayed. These volunteers truly run needed support services.

The volunteer work is divided into thirteen areas, and a resident coordinator is in charge of each area. The staff coordinator meets with these thirteen resident coordinators on a regular basis and meets with each of the thirteen groups on an ongoing basis. These meetings include training sessions, discussion of problems volunteers might be experiencing, and suggestions for changes or new ideas for programs. These meetings maintain a high degree of interest and involvement on the part of the volunteers and are an essential part of the program.

Volunteer recognition is also built into the program. Once a year, a large volunteer recognition event is held. Board members, staff, and community agencies play a major role in giving recognition to resident volunteers.

#### CHALLENGES AND PROBLEMS

An in-house volunteer program for seniors is not without challenges and problems. A commitment of staff time is continually needed to: create additional meaningful volunteer jobs; interview, train, and supervise volunteers; coordinate activities, process and control work schedules; resolve conflicts and other problems; serve as a liaison to community resources; and, act as an advocate for senior volunteers.

The most troubling and difficult concern with which the staff continually struggles is

working with residents who because of a decline in functioning can no longer do their volunteer jobs. Instead of retiring residents who are unable to perform their jobs, it is a policy of the facility to create a less demanding job and help the residents accept and retrain for their new position. This policy helps the volunteers preserve their positive self-image.

## BENEFITS

A resident volunteer program can be a democratic, low cost, and innovative way for retirement housing facilities to continuously provide desired activities for residents. Such a program can offer residents the opportunity for meaningful decision making, active participation, and involvement, which in turn is associated with the maintenance of life satisfaction, morale, and general well-being. As one resident wrote:

*Retirement is probably the biggest change in life style an adult experiences. It is also potentially the most dangerous. In some societies it signifies an end to one's usefulness. It is interesting to note that societies with this attitude toward older adults have not survived. The oldest and most successful societies are the ones that honor and respect their older adults.*

*My retirement gave me one of the most important things that I have earned through my years of work—the ability to choose what I want to do with my time. Let me tell you choices I have made.*

*On October 23, 1980, a Friday, I moved into Plough Towers. The following Monday I offered my services . . . in what ever capacity . . . needed.*

*I have been a volunteer receptionist for almost six years—later becoming coordinator of that position. In addition to that job, I teach English to our Russian immigrants and conduct citizenship training and use my organizational ability to coordinate other volunteer groups.*

*I have always lived under the precept that something must be accomplished every day or that day has no value. It is this sense of accomplishment, this sense of worth, if you*

*will, that volunteer work has allowed me to keep.*

*I have a wealth of experiences acquired over the years to offer. Being a volunteer gives me an outlet for all this.*

*This sense of value and worth that I have is something that cannot be measured. It means more to me than you can know.*

A resident volunteer program can truly be a rewarding way of helping seniors continue an independent life style.

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